

12/11/2016 - 3rd Sunday of Advent

“A State of Wonder; God’s Kingdom of Wondering” - Rev. Seth D. Jones © Scripture: *Isaiah 61:1-11*

Isaiah speaks powerful words to us today. In this time of waiting and watching, we hear that the LORD has chosen

*Me (us) to bring good news to the poor,
to help the brokenhearted,
to decree the release of captives,
and the freeing of prisoners,
2 to announce the year when the LORD will show his favor, (Is 61:1)*

A long time later, Jesus will stand in the temple and unroll the reading for the day and read this very Scripture to the people to announce the beginning of his ministry (*Luke 4:16-21*). In between Isaiah’s promise and the renewal of the holy call through Jesus, there are hundreds of years.

Just like us and the Christmas story, which we have heard over and over during the years of our lives, the people of Israel heard this announcement from Isaiah over and over throughout generations.

When we hear a story over and over again, especially the Christmas story, it is easy to become complacent about the story.

*This means that; I know this story
already; The priests, the rabbis, the
commentators have all told us everything I
can ever know about this story.*

One way we, as God-fearing Americans, attempt to renew verses like Isaiah 61 and the Christmas story is to politicize them.

We bring good news to the poor by legislating where and how we can or can’t speak about and do things in the name of the faith, even to the point of folding powerful ideas like ‘religious freedom’ inside out;

we try to argue for or against and enact policies that release prisoners, or keep them imprisoned, twisting our Scriptural foundations for vague ideas of safety;

we create a ‘moral majority’ that wraps itself in the legislative actions of the state for the apparent sake of religion or secularism,

thereby diluting and polluting both faith and politics.

Complacency and politicization both eliminate the one way of approaching Isaiah’s vision and the Christmas story which is guaranteed to always renew the vision - **wonder**. When we engage wonder about God’s vision and kingdom here on earth, when we ask “*I wonder...*” about the stories we tell one another about our faith, when we wonder about our experience of God and other in the world, the story and our faith renews itself. We ask the vision and kingdom of God to present itself in new ways in our stories, our experience, and our relationship with God.

Paul says in ***Colossians 1:15-17***:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation,

*for all things in heaven and on earth were created by him – all things, whether visible or invisible, whether thrones or dominions, whether principalities or powers – all things were created through him and for him.
He himself is before all things and all things are held together in him.*

Christ is the being, the principle, the supernatural something that holds all things in the universe together. And so, as a follower of Christ, you and I look in wonder for the presence of Christ in all things.

The Greeks had a phrase for this kind of approach to the world. They called it “*systematic wonder*”. Every new discovery was approached with a sense of wonder, an understanding that the thing discovered creates opportunities for more discovery, every answer to a question means there are better questions to ask. Albert Einstein called it *holy curiosity*. This is the position I believe every Advent season asks us to adopt:

Yes, I have heard this story many times before. But I am curious - I wonder - about this part of it. Maybe this doesn't mean what I thought it meant. Maybe there is a better question to ask this time.

Proverbs 1:7 says,

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Fear, in the Old Testament, doesn't mean 'fear' the way we mean it. In the ancient world, fear primarily communicated 'awe' and 'wonder'.

We are made humble by our awe and wonder at the creation of God and the presence of God within it. So 'wonder' is the beginning of knowledge, the beginning of wisdom.

When we are complacent about the stories we tell ourselves, we no longer wonder. For instance, it is easy to overlook many things if one of the stories we have been told over and over and over is the 3rd Law of Physical Motion: *For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.*

But if you are Roger Shawyer from England, you might ask better questions, even in the face of physical laws of motion. Dr. Shawyer wondered, “*I wonder why bouncing electromagnetic waves inside a microwave container produces more thrust without needing more fuel.*” He had done the math, and he had developed some conceptual ideas about the model. He called it an EmDrive and said that, if we were to build one, we could get astronauts from here to Mars in 70 days - a trip which would take 4 years or more with traditional rocket technology. The reason it takes so long is because rockets produce thrust by using energy in the form of rocket fuel. But the EmDrive just bounces a laser beam around in a cone.

The bouncing laser creates even more thrust and so you just keep going faster without requiring more power to go faster. It is a direct violation of everything we know about physics - but it works.

Asking “*I wonder*” means we discover new things. Dr. Shawyer's experiments have been replicated around the world and the interest in an EmDrive is accelerating, even in NASA. It may turn out that we just don't understand some fundamental force at work in the universe; or it may mean we have a crude and uninformed understanding of the 3rd Law of Physics.

Once we understand more, we will either have a super-fast drive that gets us deep into the solar system within 10 years, or we will have a deeper understanding of Newton's 3rd Law. Both are wins, and both are the result of the power of Wondering about God's creation.

Wonder and curiosity is, as Riley Balikian from Wheaton University says in an article by Ann Kroeker,

“simply a response to God's creative movements...From God all things proceed, including our curiosity..Curiosity breeds a myriad of questions, but wisdom leads us to the prudent ones.”¹

My grandfather, Rudy Speiser, was a metallurgist at Ohio State and Arizona State Universities, who also worked with rocket fuels and particle physics.

He was in constant wonder about the world.

He taught himself computer programming so he could use a small, green screen desktop way back in the mid 1980s, in large part because he wondered how computers worked.

He also learned how to program because he had a bigger question, a bigger wonder - he wondered how clouds hold together over time.

As he got older, other wonders began to work their way in. At the end of his life, he wondered about the Bible, and God, and Jesus, so he began to teach himself Biblical Greek.

All his research, all his stories, were predicated on wonder.

Wonder is the foundation which allows us access to God's creation through science, and wonder is the foundation which allows us access to God's spiritual call to us. By developing a 'systematic wonder' or 'holy curiosity' about our faith, our relationships, and our world, we begin to go deeper into our understanding.

We begin to ask better questions and the answers we find lead us to even better questions.

The next time you are reading the Gospels, notice how many times Jesus asks questions. He asks, "What do you think?", "How do you read this", "Who do you say that I am?" Asking questions, not answering them, is an old and ancient method of learning.

Ann Kroeker says,

Curiosity (wonder) is engaged and driven by questions. Adults who have tamped down and lost touch with their curiosity over time may need help forming questions to engage their minds again. People can help each other regain and nurture a holy curiosity, as all ages, young and old, begin asking good questions of each other. Curious questioning reconnects us with loved ones; makes the Scriptures fresh and alive as the Spirit moves and guides; unearths answers to troubling concerns; and keeps us intellectually vibrant.²

Often, in our daily lives, when we are challenged, we ask

“Why is this happening?

Why is God doing this to me?”

If we change the question to

¹ From "Nurturing A Holy Curiosity" by Ann Kroeker, article posted Feb 17, 2016:

<http://byfaithonline.com/nurturing-a-holy-curiosity/>. Accessed 12/7/16

² *ibid*

“I wonder what God is up to in this moment? Or I am curious about what God wants me to see in this experience?”

we will create a spiritual space where wisdom and faith grow with more questions rather than more answers, where our love for one another seeks deeper questions about what we have already begun to understand.

Advent is this weird time of **waiting** for the Messiah, and when the Messiah shows up we are either upset that he does not match our expectations, or we are excited by the possibilities that awaken when our expectations dissolve before our eyes.

It is a weird time of **watching**, because what we see either confirms our prior experience or we begin to understand that what we see may not be as things appear.

It is a strange time of **wondering**, because we can wonder and be curious in a way that seeks answers that confirm the way I want things to be, or we can wonder about the story in a way that pushes us into better questions and new understandings of hope, peace, joy and love.

There are stories we hear every day from other people, from the news, from the books we read. And there are the stories we tell to other people. Sometimes, those stories we tell are other stories we have heard, and sometimes they are new stories. But in between the story we hear and the story we tell is a well of unknown things. It is that well that spurs my wonder and my curiosity. I have heard and studied this Advent story and this Christmas story many, many times. And I have told this story many, many times.

But between the story I think I know and the story I am trying to tell again there are new experiences and new wisdom I have come across.

The baby in the manger does not mean the same thing that it did last year.

Mary this year is a different kind of mother than she was a few years ago.

I wonder about Joseph this year.

I wonder why I feel like the innkeeper more this season than I ever have before. I wonder.

Like a garden that has gone dormant for the season, the stories of our faith have their seasons. And even though I know that over there I have planted the perennials and I have some herbs over there and I have pruned back the rose bush more than I did the year before, I don't really know what the garden will look like in the spring. I wonder about it. I know it, but I don't really know it until the story comes upon me again and I see it anew. I am curious and I wonder. The story of Christ is not static; it is not set in concrete in a never changing way. Instead, every year God seeks to make us wonder and become curious about what God is doing with the new life that is coming to us, again.

God does not work within the common knowledge and wisdom of the people. The laws of the world do not seem to be coherent when God is at work in our lives, like the EmDrive doesn't seem to work with the basic laws of the universe but works anyway. This is why we need wonder, why we need to always be curious. Isaiah says it this way, in chapter 29:13-14:

And the Lord said: “Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men, therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.

In a couple weeks, we will gather again, as we have year after year after year, to hear the story of

how God became human for our sake,

how the infinite takes on this finite world for the sake of the world,

how the knowledge of God through Christ holds the universe together through love.

Everything I just said is meant to generate in us wonder. None of those statements -

God became human, the infinite takes on the finite, Christ holds the universe together through love -

are in any way answers to anything.

Rather, they are statements meant to inspire wonder, propositions that allow us to ask better questions about how we are in relationship with God. Rainer Marie Rilke says,

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

And so it is with the Christmas story, a curious story of wonder.

Nurture in yourself and one another a holy curiosity, a systematic wonder, about this world God has called us to be a part of. Paul says in

Col 3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

Ask good questions about the season, and let the answers that arise create better questions. Be a child of wonder in the coming Kingdom of God and let the story renew itself for you so you can be renewed by the Holy Spirit, who wants to tell a curious, wonderful new story, again. Amen.